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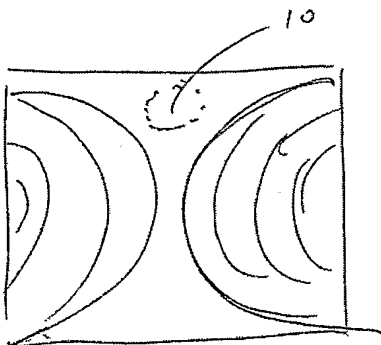
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(54) Title: SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR IMAGE-BASED ALIGNMENT OF AN ENDOSCOPE



(57) Abstract: Systems and methods for endoscopic procedures employ a first technique to ensure initial correct alignment of an endoscope (100) with a desired target (10). A reference image (51) is then acquired from an imaging arrangement associated with the endoscope. During a subsequent stage of the procedure, tracking of the endoscope position relative to the target is performed partially or entirely by image0based tracking by comparing features in real-time video image (52) produced by imaging arrangement with features in the reference image (51). The feature comparison may be performed visually by a user, or may be automated to offer more specific corrective suggestions to the user.

WO 2005/102175 A2

System and Method for Image-Based Alignment of an Endoscope

FIELD AND BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates to endoscopy techniques and, in particular, it concerns a system and method for image-based alignment of an endoscope during
5 at least part of an endoscopic procedure.

The present invention will be exemplified in the context of a system as described in the co-assigned PCT application published as WO 03/086498 entitled “Endoscope Structure and Techniques for Navigation in Branched Structure” to Gilboa, which is hereby incorporated by reference in its entirety. The
10 aforementioned patent application discloses a method and apparatus in which a thin locatable guide, enveloped by a sheath, is used to navigate a bronchoscopic tool to a target location within the lung, aimed in particular to deliver treatments to the lung periphery beyond the bronchoscope’s own reach. The coordinates of the target are predetermined based upon three-dimensional CT data. A location sensor is
15 incorporated at the locatable guide’s tip. The enveloped guide is inserted into the lung via the working channel of a bronchoscope. First, the bronchoscope’s tip is directed to the furthest reachable location in the direction of the target. Next, the guide is advanced beyond the tip of the bronchoscope towards the designated target, based on the combination of the CT data and the position of the guide’s tip
20 as measured in body coordinates. When the guide’s tip at the target, the guide is withdrawn, freeing the enveloping sheath for insertion a bronchoscopic tool. In order to prevent the distal end portion of the sheath from sliding away from the target, the sheath is locked to the bronchoscope’s body and the bronchoscope itself is held steadily to prevent it from slipping further into the lungs or outwards.
25 Because the airways in the periphery of the lung are narrow, approximately in the same dimensions as the sheath, sideways movements are extremely limited.

The above system may also be used to navigate the tip of the bronchoscope to a target located inside the main bronchus and not only to targets in the periphery of the lungs. Although for such centrally-located target the physician has direct

visualization of the scene in front of the bronchoscope, it is not always sufficient for visually identifying the designated targets, since many of these targets are hidden in the tissue outside the airways. Hence, it is a benefit to combine the CT data into the navigational aids also for targets inside the main bronchus, where the bronchoscope can reach and direct vision exists, but yet the target itself is hidden.

When using the navigation system for navigating the tip of the bronchoscope itself, many of the mechanical features of the locatable guide described in WO 03/086498 are not needed. Specifically, the steerability of the guide is not needed, and the enveloping sheath is also not needed. However the principle of using a separate locatable guide having a location sensor at its tip and being inserted into the working channel of a regular bronchoscope actually changes the bronchoscope from a non-locatable bronchoscope to a locatable bronchoscope, thereby offering major advantages as will become clear.

As in the prior art apparatus, the locatable guide can be inserted into and withdrawn from the bronchoscope's working channel as needed. Unlike the periphery of the lung, the central airways are much wider than the bronchoscope. As a consequence, when the tip of the bronchoscope is on target, it can move sideways in addition to sliding in and out. Therefore stabilizing the bronchoscope's tip during treatment is a three dimensional task, involving the operation of the steering ability of the bronchoscope. An example for the importance for maintaining the location of the bronchoscope's tip at the designated target during the insertion of the bronchoscopic tool is the use of the Transbronchial Histology Needle, by which a needle is guided towards a target such as a lymph node which neighbors the main bronchus from the outside and thus is invisible to the bronchoscope image but its coordinates are known from the CT data. Any mistake in directing the needle may result not only in failure of the procedure, but worse, in causing damage to vital organs such as the aorta or other major blood vessels.

In principle, the same methods as presented in WO 03/086498 may be used in the context of the major airways. Specifically, by using the location of the tip of the bronchoscope as measured by the location measurement sensor, a directing

display is produced corresponding to a simulation or schematic diagram of the view from the distal tip of the guide, which is based on the relative location of the target versus the position of the tip of the guide in six degrees of freedom. In the central airways, this view is supplemented by the direct video image from the bronchoscope imaging arrangement. Based on these two displays, the physician brings the tip of the bronchoscope to the target. When the tip of the bronchoscope is correctly aligned with and adjacent to the target (Figure 7), the guide with the location sensor is withdrawn (as shown in Figure 8), thereby freeing the bronchoscope's working channel for insertion a bronchoscopic tool (Figure 9a). Once the locatable guide is released, the directing display can no longer function for directing the tip to target. Instead, the physician has to hold the bronchoscope as steadily as possible during withdrawal of the guide and the insertion of the tool. If the bronchoscope slips from the target location (for example, as shown in Figure 9b), the physician may notice the change of position in the video image, but has no effective tool available to help him return the tip of the bronchoscope reliably to the desired target (other than reinserting the guide and repeating the navigation process).

Hence, it would be of benefit to have a method and corresponding system for confirming correct alignment of the tip of an endoscope after removal of a locatable guide used to achieve initial alignment, particularly for procedures involving a target which is obscured from view.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention is a system and method for image-based alignment of an endoscope.

According to the teachings of the present invention there is provided, a method for confirming correct alignment of a distal end of an endoscope including an imaging arrangement during an endoscopic procedure, the method comprising: (a) positioning the distal end of the endoscope adjacent to a target location and capturing a reference image using the imaging arrangement; (b) sensing a real-time

video image using the imaging arrangement; and (c) comparing features of the real-time video image with the reference image to confirm correct alignment of the endoscope.

5 According to a further feature of the present invention, the step of positioning employs a target location identified in three-dimensional image data of a region of a body to be treated.

According to a further feature of the present invention, the three-dimensional image data is derived from an imaging technique selected from: computerized tomography; magnetic resonance imaging; positron emission tomography; and
10 ultrasound.

According to a further feature of the present invention, the step of positioning employs a position sensor associated with the distal end of the endoscope, the position sensor being part of a position measuring system.

According to a further feature of the present invention, the step of
15 positioning is performed by comparing the position of the distal end of the endoscope as measured by the position measuring system and the target location as identified in the image data.

According to a further feature of the present invention, the position sensor is part of an elongated element deployed within a working channel of the endoscope, and wherein the elongated element is withdrawn from the working channel prior to
20 the comparing.

According to a further feature of the present invention, the target location is not visible in the reference image.

According to a further feature of the present invention, the reference image
25 and the real-time video image are displayed simultaneously to facilitate performance of the comparing features visually by a user.

According to a further feature of the present invention, the comparing includes co-processing the reference image and at least one frame from the real-time video to determine a measure of mismatch, the method further comprising
30 generating an alarm signal if the measure of mismatch exceeds a predefined value.

According to a further feature of the present invention, the comparing includes co-processing the reference image and at least one frame from the real-time video to determine a displacement correction required to compensate for erroneous movement of the endoscope, the method further comprising generating a display indicative to a user of the displacement correction required to compensate for the erroneous movement of the endoscope.

According to a further feature of the present invention, the comparing includes co-processing the reference image and at least one frame from the real-time video to determine a transformation relating the real-time video frame to the reference image, the method further comprising generating a display corresponding to the real-time video with addition of an indication of a target location, position of the indication being derived at least in part by use of the transformation.

According to a further feature of the present invention, the endoscope is a bronchoscope.

There is also provided according to the teachings of the present invention, a system for ensuring correct alignment of an endoscope during performance of an endoscopic procedure, the system comprising: (a) an endoscope having a distal end for insertion into a body; (b) an imaging arrangement associated with the endoscope and configured to generate a real-time video image of a region beyond the distal end; and (c) a processing system associated with the imaging arrangement and configured to: (i) in an initial state of alignment with a target location, derive from the imaging arrangement a reference image corresponding to correct alignment with the target location, (ii) derive from the imaging arrangement real-time images of the region beyond the distal end, and (iii) co-process the reference image and the real-time images to determine a current alignment status of the endoscope with the target location.

According to a further feature of the present invention, the processing system is configured to co-process the reference image and the real-time images to determine a measure of mismatch, the processing system further generating an alarm signal if the measure of mismatch exceeds a predefined value.

According to a further feature of the present invention, there is also provided a display for displaying at least the real-time images to a user, wherein the processing system is configured to co-process the reference image and the real-time images to determine a displacement correction required to compensate for erroneous movement of the endoscope, the processing system further generating an indication on the display indicative to a user of the displacement correction required to compensate for the erroneous movement of the endoscope.

According to a further feature of the present invention, there is also provided a display for displaying at least the real-time images to a user, wherein the processing system is configured to co-process the reference image and the real-time images to determine a transformation relating the real-time video frame to the reference image, the processing system further generating on the display an indication of a target location, position of the indication being derived at least in part by use of the transformation.

According to a further feature of the present invention, there is also provided a position measuring system including a position sensor carried by an elongated element removably deployable along a working channel of the endoscope.

There is also provided according to the teachings of the present invention, a method for facilitating performance of an endoscopic procedure on a target which is obscured from view by an imaging arrangement of an endoscope, the method comprising: (a) generating real-time video from the imaging arrangement of the endoscope; (b) determining a position of the target and a position of a distal end of the endoscope; (c) generating a display including the real-time video and a simulated view of the target correctly positioned within the real-time video; and (d) adjusting the display so as to maintain the target correctly positioned within the real-time video when the endoscope is moved.

According to a further feature of the present invention, the adjusting includes comparing features from at least one frame of the real-time video with features from a reference image derived from the imaging arrangement during the

step of determining, thereby deriving a transformation relating the real-time video frame to the reference image.

According to a further feature of the present invention, the determining a position of a distal end of the endoscope is performed using position measuring
5 system including a position sensor carried by an elongated element removably deployable along a working channel of the endoscope.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The invention is herein described, by way of example only, with reference to the accompanying drawings, wherein:

10 Figure 1 is a video display of the target zone inside the bronchial tree when the tip of the bronchoscope is off target.

Figure 2 is a simulated tip view corresponding to the position of Figure 1.

Figure 3 is a video display of the target zone inside the bronchial tree when the tip of the bronchoscope is on the target.

15 Figure 4 is a simulated tip view corresponding to the position of Figure 3.

Figure 5 is a display of a combination of a stored image and live video in the context of first preferred embodiment of the invention.

Figure 6 is the display of a combination of a stored image and live video in the context of a second preferred embodiment of the invention.

20 Figure 7 is a schematic side cross-sectional view showing the bronchoscope having been correctly aligned by use of a position measurement sensor with a target which is obscured from view.

Figure 8 is a view similar to Figure 7 after removal of the position measurement sensor to free a working lumen of the bronchoscope.

25 Figure 9a is a view similar to Figure 8 after insertion of a tool along the working lumen.

Figure 9b is a view similar to Figure 9a after erroneous movement has disrupted alignment of the tool with the obscured target.

Figure 10 is a schematic illustration of the components of a system, constructed and operative according to the teachings of the present invention, for ensuring correct alignment of an endoscope during performance of an endoscopic procedure.

5 DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

The present invention is a system and method for image-based alignment of an endoscope.

10 The principles and operation of systems and methods according to the present invention may be better understood with reference to the drawings and the accompanying description.

15 First in general terms, the present invention provides systems and methods for endoscopic procedures (exemplified herein with reference to bronchoscopic procedures) wherein a first technique is used to ensure initial correct alignment of an endoscope with a desired target and a reference image is acquired from an imaging arrangement associated with the endoscope. Then, during a subsequent stage of the procedure, tracking of the endoscope position relative to the target is performed partially or entirely by image-based tracking by comparing features in the real-time video image produced by the imaging arrangement with features in the reference image.

20 Thus, according to a first aspect of the present invention, a method for confirming correct alignment of a distal end of an endoscope during an endoscopic procedure includes: positioning the distal end of the endoscope adjacent to a target location and capturing a reference image using the imaging arrangement; sensing a real-time video image using the imaging arrangement; and comparing features of
25 the real-time video image with the reference image to confirm correct alignment of the endoscope.

It will immediately be appreciated that the present invention offers profound advantages, particularly for cases where the desired target is obscured from view (such as behind other tissue) or is not readily identifiable directly by visual

imaging. In such cases, navigation under video imaging alone is insufficient. Nevertheless, after use of a primary tracking system (such as that of the aforementioned WO 03/086498) to achieve initial alignment, use of feature-based optical tracking based on features not necessarily belonging to the target frees the system from subsequent dependence on the primary tracking system, thereby allowing removal of the position measurement probe and/or rendering navigation more robust and reliable in the face of disturbances such as movement of the patient's body or the like. These and other advantages of the present invention will become clearer from the subsequent description.

Referring now to the drawings, Figure 10 shows schematically a preferred implementation of a system, constructed and operative according to the teachings of the present invention, for implementing the methods of the present invention. For one set of preferred implementations of the method of the present invention, the system is substantially similar to that described in WO 03/086498 with certain changes to the display and/or image processing systems, as will be described below. Thus, a position measurement sensor 101 and video sensor 102 are incorporated in the distal tip of bronchoscope 100. An electro-magnetic tracking system induces electro-magnetic fields from antennae 107, senses the signals from the location sensor 101 and determines the position of the tip of the bronchoscope in six degrees of freedom. A processing system 108 gathers that position information together with the video image from the tip of the bronchoscope as produced by the video camera 104. The processing system may display to the physician live video, captured images and simulated views on a display screen 110.

Further details of a particularly preferred position measuring system for measuring position in six degrees-of-freedom may be found in U.S. Patent No. 6,188,355 and PCT Application Publication Nos. WO 00/10456 and WO 01/67035. Most preferably, at least one, and preferably three, reference sensors (not shown) are also attached to the chest of the patient and their 6 DOF coordinates sent to processing system 108 where they are used to calculate the patient coordinate frame of reference.

It should be noted in this context that the term "position sensor" is used herein in the description and claims to refer to any element which can be associated permanently or temporarily with an object and functions together with other components of a position measuring system to determine the position and/or attitude of the object. It should be appreciated that the terminology does not necessarily imply that the position sensor itself is capable of any measurement alone. Nor does this terminology imply any particular function of the position sensor, such that the "sensor" may be a transmitter, a receiver or any other element which functions as part of a position measuring system, depending upon the technology employed. In all such cases, the element is referred to as a "position sensor" since its presence associated with the object allows sensing by the system of the object's position.

Although described herein with reference to a non-limiting preferred implementation employing a bronchoscope, it should be noted that the present invention is equally applicable to substantially any intra-body endoscopic procedure.

As in the aforementioned WO 03/086498, the location of the desired target within the body is preferably determined in an offline preparation session prior to the procedure in which the target is identified in three-dimensional image data of a region of a body to be treated. The three-dimensional image data is preferably derived from an imaging technique selected from: computerized tomography; magnetic resonance imaging; positron emission tomography; and ultrasound. Most commonly, computerized tomography ("CT") data is used. Then, after suitable calibration to register the position measurement system coordinates with the CT data, a simulated tip view or other visual navigation aids as described in WO 03/086498 are used to guide the bronchoscope into alignment with the target. These navigation aids are based on comparing the position of the distal end of the endoscope as measured by the position measuring system and the target location as identified in the image data. Then, according to one particularly preferred set of

embodiments, the position sensor is withdrawn from a working channel of the endoscope as part of an elongated element.

Figures 1-4 illustrate schematically examples the displays which are preferably available to the physician during initial alignment of the bronchoscope. Specifically, Figure 1 shows an example of a target area. The target is obscured from view, being located behind the tissue of a bifurcation inside the bronchus. The target 10, marked in a broken line, is not visible in the video image. In one embodiment of the invention, it is not marked in the video display at all. In another preferred embodiment it's the target's location, as calculated by the processing system 108, is displayed in the video display by an artificial mark such as a line, a point, a broken line, a colored area, a three dimensional entity or a combination of any of the above.

In Figure 1, the tip of the bronchoscope is shown to be positioned off the direction of the target. Figure 2 is the tip view used for directing to the target. The direction of the target relative to the tip is presented by dot 20 marking the target and arrow 22 aiming from the tip to the target. The target may also be presented in a simulated view of the boundary of the actual target lesion as calculated from the CT data or by a colored area or by three-dimensional entity or by any combination of the above. According to the example, the tip should be deflecting in the 12 o'clock direction in order to be on target. Figures 3 and 4 show the same scenario when the tip is on target. According to the prior art described above, after achieving alignment with the target as shown, the physician has to try to hold the bronchoscope steady while withdrawing the locatable guide and inserting a tool along the lumen. According to the present invention, before the guide is withdrawn, the image as shown in Figure 3 is captured and stored in a memory device of processing system 108. Now the system has two sources of images to control the location of the bronchoscope's distal tip, a real-time live video image 52 and a captured video image 51 where the tip was located at the desired target location, as shown in Figure 5.

The present invention may be implemented in a number of different embodiments with different degrees of sophistication as to how the comparison between features of the real-time video and the reference image is performed. According to a first basic embodiment, the reference image 51 and the real-time video image 52 are displayed simultaneously on display device 110 as illustrated in Figure 5, thereby facilitating visual comparison of the image features by a user. In this case, the physician himself compares the two images and decides whether the bronchoscope is located in the required location, and if not, in what direction the tip of the bronchoscope should be deflected.

In more sophisticated embodiments, the system preferably co-processes the reference image and the real-time images to determine a current alignment status of the endoscope with the target location. Thus, processing system 108 is configured to: derive from the imaging arrangement of the endoscope, in an initial state of alignment with a target location, a reference image corresponding to correct alignment with the target location; derive from the imaging arrangement real-time images of the region beyond the distal end, and co-process the reference image and the real-time images to determine a current alignment status of the endoscope with the target location.

Here too, the co-processing may be implemented at various different levels of sophistication. In a simplest case, a correlation between the reference image and the current video image may offer a measure of mismatch. The user can then empirically adjust the position of the bronchoscope tip to maximize the correlation (minimize the mismatch), thereby returning to the correct position. Application of a threshold to the measure of mismatch may be used to activate an alarm signal.

In more preferred implementations, the system tracks features or regions from the reference image in the video image to provide more specific indications to the user of the required correction for any erroneous movement of the bronchoscope off target. For small-scale lateral displacements, this may be implemented simply by correlating a central sub-window 56 of reference image 51 centered on target location 55 with a corresponding sized sliding window (i.e., at

multiple different positions) in the real-time video to find the best match, thereby identifying the position of the target sub-window in the real-time video image.

At a next level of sophistication, the tracking may also allow for scaling and/or rotation of the sub-window. This allows the system to maintain target
5 tracking during rotation, as well as small-scale advancing or withdrawal, of the bronchoscope. A further level of sophistication may employ planar transformations such as affine transformations which approximate the distortions caused by viewing a surface from different viewing angles.

At the top end of the range of sophistication in the tracking algorithms are
10 tracking techniques based on three-dimensional modeling of the viewed scene and reconstruction of the camera path. Such techniques, often referred to as “Structure from Motion”, are well developed in the field of optical tracking and computer vision, and allow reconstruction of three-dimensional models from a single moving camera. Details of processing techniques for implementing structure from motion
15 may be found in papers from the Robotics Research Group in the Department of Engineering Science, Oxford University (UK) such as “Automatic Camera Tracking” by Andrew W. Fitzgibbon et al. Video Registration (2003) and “Feature Based Methods for Structure and Motion Estimation” by P.H.S. Torr et al. Vision Algorithms: Theory and Practice (2000), both available from
20 <http://www.robots.ox.ac.uk/>.

In the present application, structure-from-motion processing can be greatly simplified by the use of model data based on CT data or the like. Thus, for example, given that the initial reference image is taken from a known position as established by the primary alignment system, a “depth” (i.e., camera-to-surface
25 distance) associated with each pixel of the reference image can be derived directly from CT data, thereby providing an initial three-dimensional model from which processing can begin. This approach has advantages of robustness under significant changes of view, and even where there is no overlap between the current real-time video field of view and the reference image.

In any or all of the above-mentioned tracking techniques, corrections are preferably made for geometrical distortions introduced by the optics of the imaging arrangement, as is known in the art. These corrections may be performed on the source images prior to implementing the tracking techniques, or may be
5 incorporated into the tracking calculations themselves.

The output from the system (and method) of the present invention may take a number of forms. In a simplest case mentioned above, an alarm may be sounded if a measure of mismatch between the current video and the reference image indicates that the bronchoscope has wandered off target, and the measure of
10 mismatch (or the correlation) may be displayed to the user or indicated by an audio signal to provide feedback indicative of "getting hotter" or "getting colder" with regard to alignment with the target.

In more preferred implementations where features of the reference image are positively tracked within the real-time video, the processing system may generate
15 an indication on the display indicative to a user of the displacement correction required to compensate for the erroneous movement of the endoscope. This may take the form of an arrow or vector such as line 62 in Figure 6 which indicates the movement of the bronchoscope required to bring the center of the field of view into alignment with the target position illustrated as 61. Thus, Figure 6 corresponds to
20 the display when the bronchoscope is in the position of Figure 9b. After performing the required corrective motion, the bronchoscope returns to the position of Figure 9a and the live video 52 of Figure 6 would again appear similar to the reference image 51.

Alternatively, or additionally, a transformation (2 or 3 dimensional)
25 calculated by the processing system for relating the real-time video frame to the reference image may be used to determine the position of the obscured target within the real-time video image. The target location can then be designated in the real-time video image, for example, by the sub-window frame 58 or the marker 57 as shown in Figure 5.

According to a most preferred option, which is believed to be of patentable significance in its own right, the present invention provides an augmented reality endoscopic display in which a simulated view of an obscured target is displayed in the context of the real-time video so that the target appears correctly positioned within the video image and moves so as to maintain the correct positioning of the target within the real-time video when the endoscope is moved. This augmented reality display allows the user to operate the endoscope in a fully intuitive manner as if the target were directly viewable via the video imaging arrangement of the endoscope. Thus, the user will see obscured target 10 of Figures 1 and 3 as if the tissue in front of the target was semi-transparent.

In practical terms, the simulated view of the target used for the augmented reality display is preferably derived from three-dimensional imaging data such as CT in which the target tissue has been designated prior to the procedure. The target tissue volume is then preferably exported as a three-dimensional graphic object, or a closed body geometrical approximation to the tissue volume is generated. Then, during the procedure, information regarding the relative positions and orientations of the endoscope tip and the target tissue is used to determine the position, viewing angle and scaling factors which should be used to represent the target correctly in the real-time video image. The target is preferably indicated as a semi-transparent video overlay so that it appears as a ghost image without completely hiding the tissue actually viewed in the video image. Alternatively, a dashed outline or any other suitable indication may be used.

The augmented reality display is advantageous both during initial alignment of the endoscope with the target and during subsequent performance of a procedure. Most preferably, during a procedure, real-time adjustment of the simulated target image within the video image is performed on the basis of the optical tracking of the present invention. Where optical tracking is performed in two dimensions only, the adjustment of the target appearance will correspondingly be reduced to a two-dimensional manipulation. Where three-dimensional model

based tracking is used, full three-dimensional augmented reality functionality is preferably maintained.

In each case, an alarm is preferably activated if the location error, i.e., the misalignment of the real-time video from the reference image, exceeds a predefined value, for example, the size of the target. The alarm may be an audio alarm and/or a visual alarm indication such as a flashing symbol or a color change of part or all of the display. An alarm (which may be distinct from the off-target alarm) is preferably also generated if the tracking algorithm fails to maintain reliable tracking between the reference image and the current image.

As mentioned earlier, the optical tracking of the present invention does not require the target location to be visible in the reference image. In fact, it should be noted that the reference image need not even include the direction to the target in its field of view. For example, if an endoscope is to be used in a procedure with a tool which generates images, takes samples or otherwise treats a region of tissue located laterally next to the distal end of the endoscope, the imaging arrangement of the endoscope will typically not offer a view of the tissue of the target, nor of any tissue which overlies the target. Nevertheless, once correct alignment of the endoscope has been achieved using the primary tracking system, the optical tracking of the present invention based on a reference image of the scene beyond the tip of the endoscope is effective to ensure correct alignment with the target, despite the fact that the target is outside the field of view.

It will be appreciated that the above descriptions are intended only to serve as examples, and that many other embodiments are possible within the scope of the present invention as defined in the appended claims.

WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. A method for confirming correct alignment of a distal end of an endoscope including an imaging arrangement during an endoscopic procedure, the method comprising:

- (a) positioning the distal end of the endoscope adjacent to a target location and capturing a reference image using the imaging arrangement;
- (b) sensing a real-time video image using the imaging arrangement; and
- (c) comparing features of the real-time video image with the reference image to confirm correct alignment of the endoscope.

2. The method of claim 1, wherein said step of positioning employs a target location identified in three-dimensional image data of a region of a body to be treated.

3. The method of claim 2, wherein said three-dimensional image data is derived from an imaging technique selected from: computerized tomography; magnetic resonance imaging; positron emission tomography; and ultrasound.

4. The method of claim 2, wherein said step of positioning employs a position sensor associated with the distal end of the endoscope, said position sensor being part of a position measuring system.

5. The method of claim 4, wherein said step of positioning is performed by comparing the position of the distal end of the endoscope as measured by said position measuring system and the target location as identified in said image data.

6. The method of claim 4, wherein said position sensor is part of an elongated element deployed within a working channel of the endoscope, and

wherein said elongated element is withdrawn from the working channel prior to said comparing.

7. The method of claim 1, wherein said target location is not visible in said reference image.

8. The method of claim 1, further comprising displaying simultaneously said reference image and said real-time video image to facilitate performance of said comparing features visually by a user.

9. The method of claim 1, wherein said comparing includes co-processing said reference image and at least one frame from said real-time video to determine a measure of mismatch, the method further comprising generating an alarm signal if said measure of mismatch exceeds a predefined value.

10. The method of claim 1, wherein said comparing includes co-processing said reference image and at least one frame from said real-time video to determine a displacement correction required to compensate for erroneous movement of the endoscope, the method further comprising generating a display indicative to a user of said displacement correction required to compensate for the erroneous movement of the endoscope.

11. The method of claim 1, wherein said comparing includes co-processing said reference image and at least one frame from said real-time video to determine a transformation relating said real-time video frame to said reference image, the method further comprising generating a display corresponding to said real-time video with addition of an indication of a target location, position of said indication being derived at least in part by use of said transformation.

12. The method of claim 1, wherein the endoscope is a bronchoscope.

13. A system for ensuring correct alignment of an endoscope during performance of an endoscopic procedure, the system comprising:

- (a) an endoscope having a distal end for insertion into a body;
- (b) an imaging arrangement associated with said endoscope and configured to generate a real-time video image of a region beyond said distal end; and
- (c) a processing system associated with said imaging arrangement and configured to:
 - (i) in an initial state of alignment with a target location, derive from said imaging arrangement a reference image corresponding to correct alignment with the target location,
 - (ii) derive from said imaging arrangement real-time images of the region beyond said distal end, and
 - (iii) co-process said reference image and said real-time images to determine a current alignment status of said endoscope with the target location.

14. The system of claim 13, wherein said processing system is configured to co-process said reference image and said real-time images to determine a measure of mismatch, said processing system further generating an alarm signal if said measure of mismatch exceeds a predefined value.

15. The system of claim 13, further comprising a display for displaying at least said real-time images to a user, wherein said processing system is configured to co-process said reference image and said real-time images to determine a displacement correction required to compensate for erroneous movement of the endoscope, said processing system further generating an indication on said display indicative to a user of said displacement correction required to compensate for the erroneous movement of the endoscope.

16. The system of claim 13, further comprising a display for displaying at least said real-time images to a user, wherein said processing system is configured to co-process said reference image and said real-time images to determine a transformation relating said real-time video frame to said reference image, said processing system further generating on said display an indication of a target location, position of said indication being derived at least in part by use of said transformation.

17. The system of claim 13, further comprising a position measuring system including a position sensor carried by an elongated element removably deployable along a working channel of said endoscope.

18. A method for facilitating performance of an endoscopic procedure on a target which is obscured from view by an imaging arrangement of an endoscope, the method comprising:

- (a) generating real-time video from the imaging arrangement of the endoscope;
- (b) determining a position of the target and a position of a distal end of the endoscope;
- (c) generating a display including the real-time video and a simulated view of the target correctly positioned within the real-time video; and
- (d) adjusting the display so as to maintain the target correctly positioned within the real-time video when the endoscope is moved.

19. The method of claim 18, wherein said adjusting includes comparing features from at least one frame of the real-time video with features from a reference image derived from the imaging arrangement during said step of determining, thereby deriving a transformation relating said real-time video frame to said reference image.

20. The method of claim 18, wherein said determining a position of a distal end of the endoscope is performed using position measuring system including a position sensor carried by an elongated element removably deployable along a working channel of said endoscope.

1 / 7

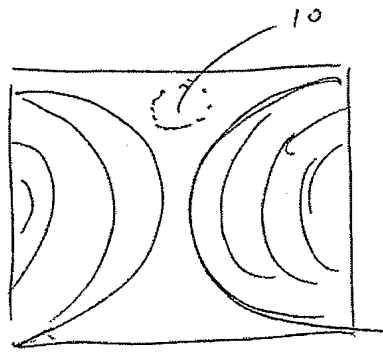


Figure 1

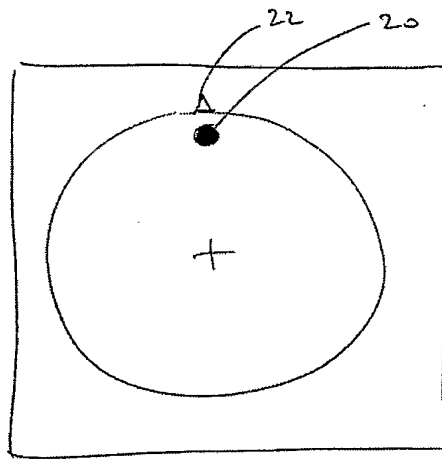


Figure 2

2 / 7

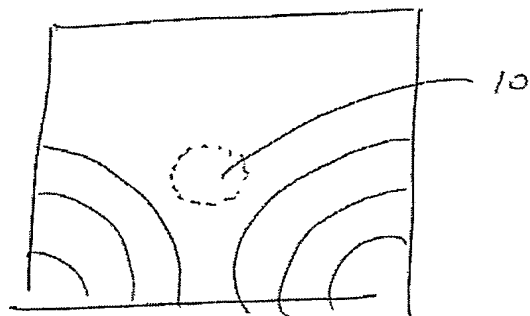


Figure 3

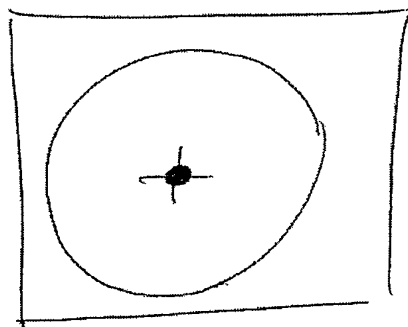


Figure 4

3 / 7

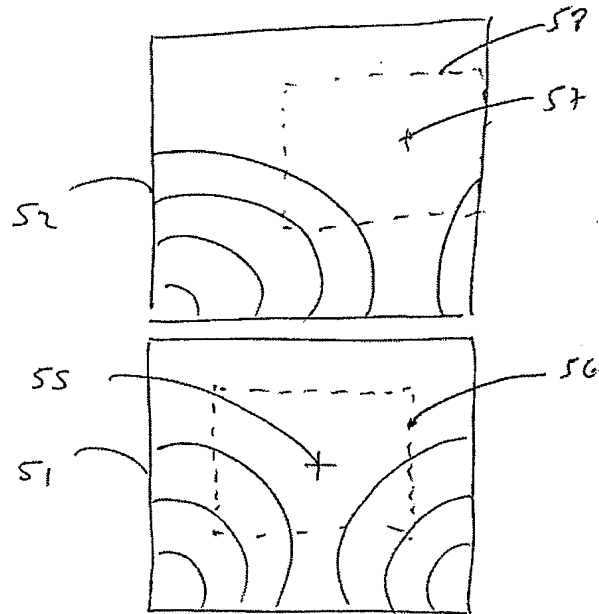


Figure 5

4 / 7

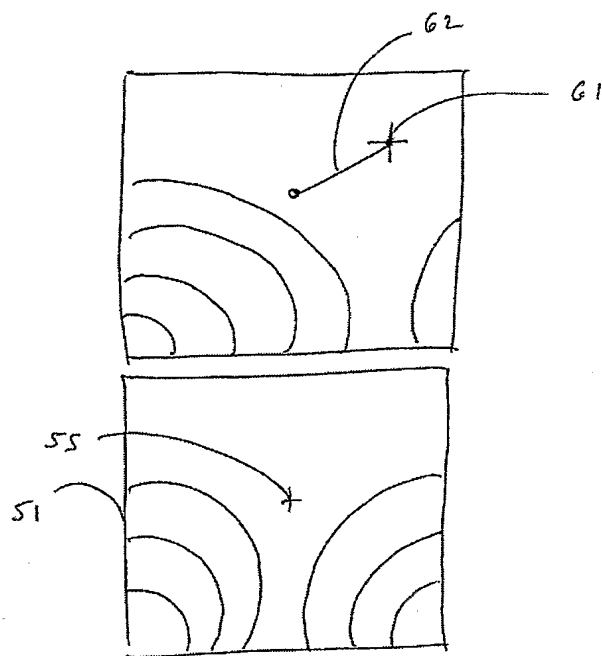


Figure 6

5 / 7

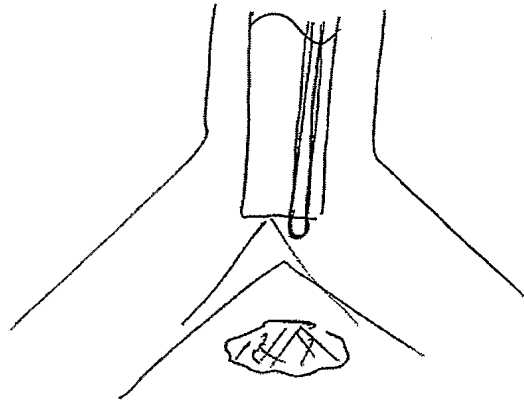


Figure 7

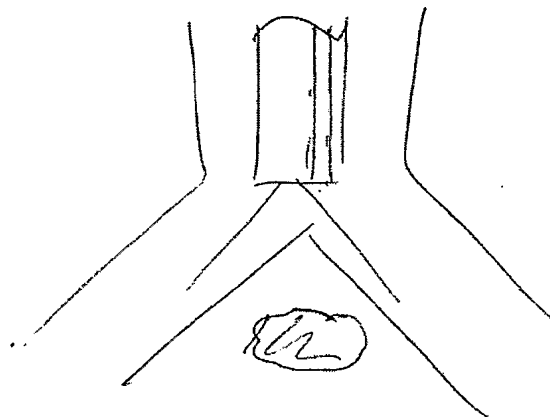


Figure 8

6 / 7

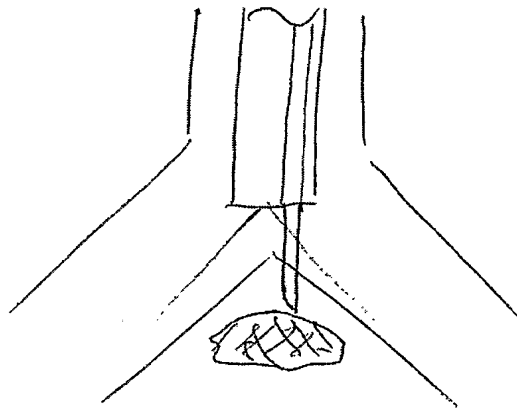


Figure 9a

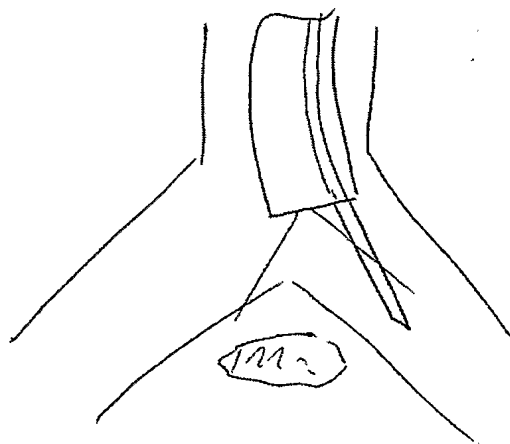


Figure 9b

7/7

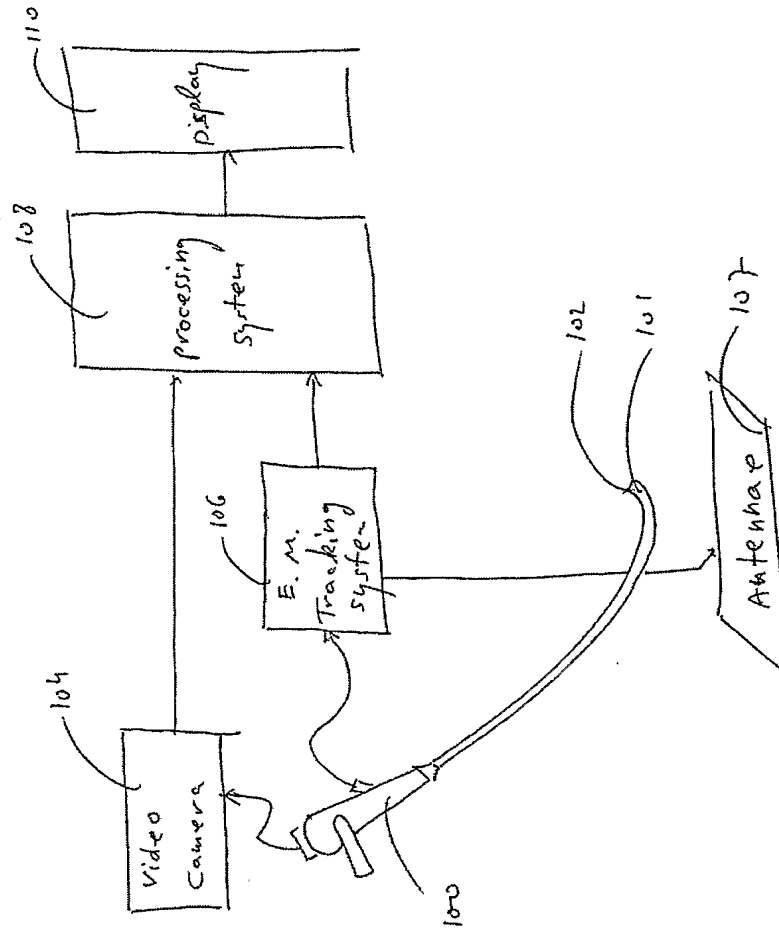


Figure 10